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# Adult education participation: the Matthew principle

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Adult education participation is a hot issue. Participation rates, however, show a lot of inequalities among countries as well as among individuals with a different socio-economic background. Within this article, we will define adult education, take a look at recent European participation statistics and explain the unequal divisions. We will introduce the Chain of Response Model by Patricia Cross (1981) to show the multi-complexity of the decision process undergone before the actual participation. We will end with the observation that adult education is a shared responsibility among three partners: individuals, educational institutions and regulating governments.

**Key words:** adult education, lifelong learning, participation, inequalities

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, growing attention has been paid to lifelong learning and adult education. The European top in Lisbon in March 2000 has stated that Europe has to become the most competitive and knowledge-based economy in the world (European Commission 2001), with increasing social cohesion being important as well. Lifelong learning is the ultimate engine to achieve these goals, and 12.5% of the population between 25 and 64 years of age have to participate, in one form or another, in adult education. It was the aim of the European Commission to realize these targets by 2010. At this moment, we have no reason to be very optimistic, taking into account that, to this day, not many European countries have achieved this participation rate of 12.5% (European Commission 2008). Besides the unequal division of rates amongst the countries themselves, we also notice that the distribution of participation rates among different socio-economic groups within these countries is not normal, either.

In this article, we start by defining the terms such as lifelong learning and adult education and by explaining the different types of learning. Once this is achieved, we will give an overview of current participation rates within the European countries as well as examples of unequal distribution relating to individual socio-economic background characteristics; subsequently, we will proceed with explaining the paradox of unequal demand stating that those with high needs of adult education participation in order to increase their knowledge and skills are least represented within the enrollment statistics. We will give some insights in this paradox and use the Cross conceptual model (1981) to gain further insights into how to realize an efficient participation in adult education. Finally, we will state the importance of shared responsibilities regarding adult education participation and mention the role of the regulating governments and educational institutions in stimulating participation among their citizens and students.

## THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

### A. Lifelong learning or adult education?

Lifelong learning is a broad term and can be interpreted in several ways (English 2005). First, lifelong learning refers to all learning activities one will undertake during his lifetime, from cradle to grave. This first concept includes kindergarten and compulsory education as well. Second and mostly meant, lifelong learning is a synonym for adult education and refers to all learning activities started after the end of compulsory education. The participation goal of 12.5% hereby includes two main forms of adult education. The first type of adult education is formal adult education (Livingstone 2004). Courses pertaining to this type of education are organized in schools or at least in a typical learning context and are, for the better part that is, comparable to compulsory education. After successful completion of a formal adult education course, a diploma, degree or an official certificate is granted. The second type is non-formal adult education (Colley et al. 2003). Although the organizational aspects of these courses bear quite a similarity with formal adult education, they do not result in an official qualification. Although most researchers in the field of lifelong learning are mostly interested in learning activities for adults, the term *lifelong learning* clearly reflecting the importance of the concept. Field (2006) stated that people are required to update their knowledge and skills in a continuous way to be able to catch up with the swiftly changing society. Managing this never ending process is therefore a lifelong task. The concept of lifelong learning also stresses the importance of learning instead of education. The concept of lifelong education as used by Faure (1972) referred rather to institutions and structures, whereas lifelong learning is a broader term stressing more the process of acquiring skills and knowledge. Within this view, we have to distinguish a third type of lifelong learning besides formal and non-formal adult education, which is informal learning (Marsick, Watkins 2001). Synonyms for informal learning are 'at-random learning', 'accidental learning' or 'incidental learning', meaning that it takes place during everyday life and that learning is not always an explicit goal. Watching television, having conversations with colleagues ... can offer a lot of surprising learning input. As informal learning takes place in everyday life and is present in almost all individuals, this type of learning is not included in most lifelong learning statistics.

The goals of these three forms of learning are pretty much the same and lead to an improvement of knowledge, skills and competencies (Rubenson et al. 2006). The benefits of learning are diverse; private and social benefits can be distinguished. Learning can improve the quality of one's own life in a financial, but also in a non-financial way such as better health and more social contacts. Social benefits can also be monetary as well as non-monetary. Participation in learning can decrease the chances to end up in unemployment, which has a positive effect on the global economy and within the country, but it can also protect from feelings of loneliness and unhappiness and thus increase social cohesion among citizens.

### B. Participation rates in adult education

Although the goal formulated by the European Commission during the top in Lisbon 2000 was expressed by means of a 4-week measurement target, most statistics related to adult education participation are gathered based on a 12-month period. Fig. 1 contains the most recent participation statistics as published on the Eurostat website. Around 42% of all European citizens participated in a certain form of adult education during the past 12 months at the moment of the survey. Within the group of less than 20% of participation, we find Eastern and Southern European countries. Western European countries as the Netherlands, the UK, Bel-

gium and Germany are very close to the European average. At the top of the participation statistics we find Austria, Slovenia and Luxembourg, followed by three Scandinavian countries. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) state that countries with a similar economic, cultural and social background show more or less the same participation rates in adult education. Adults all over Europe experience barriers and problems, but some political, cultural and economic regimes are more able to help their adults overcome these obstacles, thus stimulating their citizens to participate in adult education.

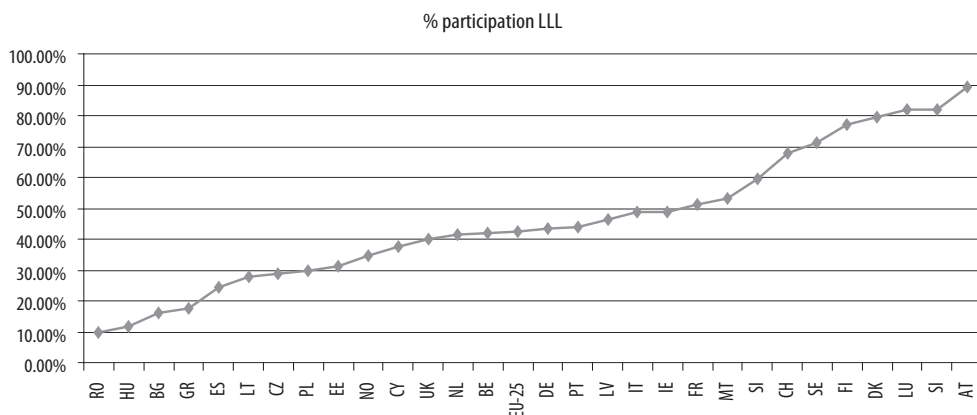


Fig. 1. PARTICIPATION RATES BY COUNTRY (EUROSTAT)

Within this article, however, we are mostly interested in the unequal participation rates of the population within specific countries among individuals. Based on analyses on the International Adult Literacy Survey, Desjardins et al. (2006) extracted some groups having fewer chances to become a participant: older adults, women, low socio-economic groups, less educated, less skilled adults, the unemployed, less skilled workers, immigrants, language minorities and rural residents. Furthermore, people often belong to more than one of these groups, and this decreases their learning opportunities even more. Literature describes the educational attainment of adults as one of the most frequent topics concerning the unequal participation in adult education (Svensson et al. 2004; Ellström 2001). Table shows that these inequalities are rather universal. In not a single European country, low-educated adults participate more than their high-educated compatriots. Adults with high degrees are more familiar with education and have already acquired readiness to learn in the past. Furthermore, these individuals have more possibilities to access a job network in which learning is stimulated and in which learning possibilities and opportunities are present (Boudard 2001).

It is clear that participation in adult education is a Matthew principle: those who already have, get more. On the one hand, this phenomenon can be explained by the low confidence and bad experiences of the low-educated (Illeris 2004). On the other hand, the less educated are of a lesser interest to employers. Their employability and trainability are lower and thus less efficient. The same findings can be applied to the low-skilled adults. Results of the International Adult Literacy Survey show the same pattern (OECD 2000). Adults with high levels of literacy participate more actively in adult education. As literacy skills are extremely important in everyday life, it is not surprising that those with low skills have less confidence in their own abilities and are less of a lesser interest to employers, resulting in their ending up in unemployment

**Table.** PARTICIPATION RATES BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (EUROSTAT)

	Low skilled	Medium skilled	High skilled	Total
EU-25	23.1	44.2	68.7	42.5
Belgium	23.3	42.4	66.9	41.9
Czech Republic	10.3	26.2	62.7	28.7
Denmark	61.5	77.4	93.4	79.6
Germany	19.0	41.1	65.8	43.4
Estonia	10.1	25.0	51.8	31.4
Greece	5.6	18.9	42.6	17.4
Spain	12.6	30.3	47.7	24.5
France	29.2	52.4	83.1	51.0
Ireland	34.5	51.4	66.4	48.9
Italy	34.4	60.7	78.0	48.6
Cyprus	8.5	34.2	76.1	37.8
Latvia	30.0	43.6	70.9	46.2
Lithuania	5.8	20.9	59.6	27.8
Luxembourg	67.4	86.4	94.7	81.9
Hungary	3.7	11.3	27.0	11.7
Malta	49.8	65.3	68.4	53.2
The Netherlands	20.1	42.6	66.2	41.7
Austria	86.8	88.6	95.3	89.2
Poland	9.2	26.5	73.9	30.0
Portugal	35.3	70.6	79.7	44.1
Slovenia	66.8	83.2	96.7	82.0
Slovakia	40.4	59.4	82.6	59.5
Finland	60.9	76.8	90.1	77.3
Sweden	48.8	69.1	87.6	71.0
United Kingdom	12.2	36.9	60.8	39.8
Bulgaria	1.8	12.2	45.2	16.1
Romania	3.3	9.5	33.2	10.0
Norway	15.1	30.3	50.5	34.7
Switzerland	28.3	66.9	90.5	68.0

(Benseman, Sutton 2005). At the overall level, Desjardins et al. (2006) distinguished six types of adults having different chances to participate. Below, we give an overview of these groups:

- group 1: employed mid- to late-career-aged (45–65) adults who are less educated, less skilled, and in low-skill blue-collar jobs;
- group 2: employed mid- to late-career-aged (45–65) adults who are highly educated, highly skilled, and in high-skill white-collar jobs;
- group 3: employed early- to mid-career-aged adults (26–45);
- group 4: unemployed or out-of-the-labour-market mid- to late-career-aged (45–65) adults who are less educated and less skilled;
- group 5: unemployed or out-of-the-labour-market mid- to late-career-aged (45–65) adults who are highly educated and highly skilled;
- group 6: unemployed or out-of-the-labour-market early- to mid-career-aged adults (26–45).

Again, Desjardins et al. (2006) state that age and educational attainment are the most important factors in explaining the inequalities in participation. Adults within groups 3 and 6 have higher chances due to their young age. Employment and educational history are less relevant in these cases. Adults belonging to groups 2 and 5 also have better chances due to their high level of knowledge and skills obtained in the past. People within groups 1 and 4 have low chances, especially those within group 4 who are unemployed.

This leads us to the overall conclusion that people with high needs of increasing their skills and knowledge are least likely to participate in adult education courses. We have already give some explanations for this paradox situation in the text above. However, reasons for participating and decision-making processes are multi-faceted phenomena and cannot be captured within one sentence. Therefore, we will try to gain further insights into the shaping of participation by employing Patricia Cross' Chain of Response Model (1981).

## **PARTICIPATION AS A DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

As stated above, participation in adult education is the result of a complex decision-making process. From the perspective of Rational Choice Theorists, participation can be seen as a cost-benefit analysis (Allingham 2002). One is interested to invest in participation under the condition that the costs must not exceed the benefits. The costs are very diverse and cannot only be reduced to direct costs. Indirect costs as childcare, loss of income, no time for other leisure activities, ... have to be taken into account as well. The benefits are just as diverse. According to Bourdieu (1984), the aim of people is to increase their capital. Inspired by Weber (1925), he states that capital means not only economic but also social and cultural capital. The economic capital refers to financial resources and other immovable goods. Marx stated that two groups are present within society, namely those who have and those who have not. Weber and Bourdieu thus go further than economic capital only. Social capital can be increased by enlarging one's networks and relationships, cultural capital is a collective term for the amount of knowledge, education and skills acquired by the individual. Furthermore, Bourdieu states that individuals do not act as individuals but are inspired and influenced by others and the different spheres within society. This reasoning is very familiar to the field theory of Lewin (Bonnes, Secchiaroli 1995). Bourdieu states that people develop their own 'habitus' within their own field. We can compare it with a biotope in which one is raised. People absorb the habits, rules and values of the field in which they behave. As a result of this habitus, moving

from one social strata to another remains different. Nevertheless, social mobility by means of education is one of the most important topics within the sociology of education (Peschar, Wesselingh 1995). Mobility refers to the change on the social ladder of class structures and can take place within a person's own lifespan or across generations within one family. This division is well known as intra-generational mobility and inter-generational mobility. Previous research showed the importance of the educational factor within social mobility. Highly educated people end up in more knowledge-intensive white collar jobs, earn more and have a broader social network. This cost-and-benefit analysis differs according to an individual's personal life. Single mothers will have additional costs for childcare, unemployed adults will have higher costs, neither do they have an employer who can pay the course for them. Furthermore, their level of knowledge and skills is less up-to-date due to their absence on the labour market. Very often an adequate level of knowledge and skills is required to start a course, making it all the more difficult for low-skilled, low-educated and unemployed adults to finish a course successfully. Benefits are also more guaranteed for employed individuals. They are rather sure that their newly learnt skills will immediately be validated on the labour market. In general, it is fair to say that costs and benefits differ for each individual and clearly affect the decision-making process whether or not to participate in adult education.

During the late seventies and the beginning of the eighties, many researchers involved in adult education have developed their own participation model in order to explain and predict the likeliness of adult participation (Fishbein, Ajzen 1980; Rubenson 1977; Boshier 1973; Cookson 1986; Darkenwald, Merriam 1982; Cross 1981). All these models can be situated within the research tradition of the socio-psychological interactionism (Manninen 2005). One of the best known and most widely used models in literature remains the Chain of Response Model developed by Cross (1981). The model itself can be seen as a cycle and consists of seven steps which all have their own impact on the decision-making process whether to participate and persist in an adult education course. Interactions with different spheres of life are important in the work of Cross and within the model reflected by the arrows.

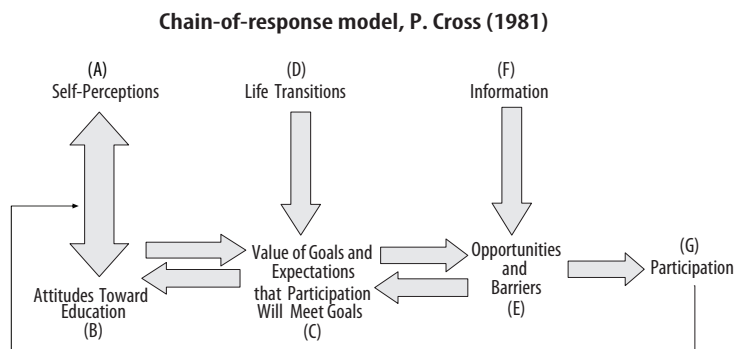


Fig. 2. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF CROSS (1981)

She starts with the interplay between the self-perception and self-evaluation of the adult together with the developed attitude towards learning. As stated above, adults with a negative learning experience in the past are less confident, enjoy learning less, have less self-esteem and thus develop a less positive attitude towards learning. These factors of attitude and self-respect interact with the values and expectations of participation. Similarly to the Expectancy Valence

Model of Rubenson, Cross states the importance of the value dedicated towards the participation by the adult learner himself together with the expectancy that participation will keep one's promises. These expectancies and values are influenced by life transitions undergone by the individual, and they interact with the opportunities and barriers experienced by the adult. Participation in a course can give certain life chances such as an increase of job success, an increase of income, more social contacts and a better performance within daily activities such as hobbies. On the other hand, barriers can block the road to an actual participation. These barriers are the central concept in the work of Cross and one of her most cited ideas. Barriers are divided into three main streams, namely situational barriers, institutional barriers and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers arise from the personal situation of an adult at a given moment. A lack of money to finance the course, a lack of time to follow a course due to job and family responsibilities and a lack of transport possibilities to reach the educational institution are examples of situational barriers. Institutional barriers come up when educational institutions generate the rules and practices that are discouraging for a lot of adults. As examples, we cite inconvenient class schedules, inappropriate entrance requirements, a lack of study advice and many more. Dispositional barriers are related to the self-esteem and attitude of the adult learner himself and affect his confidence to succeed in the course. Feeling too old, being disgusted by classrooms and teachers and feeling frustrated after an unsuccessful educational career are examples of dispositional barriers. Opportunities and barriers as experienced by the adults are mainly influenced by information on the existing educational opportunities. Not only information on the existing program, but also on the services offered by the institutions, aid channels to overcome barriers and so on seem very important within the decision-making process of an adult. As the last step, Cross states that participation will come about or not. After a successful enrollment within a course, the cycle will start all over again. A fail within the cycle will lead to a dropout, and a successful passing through the cycle will result in persistence.

## CONCLUSIONS

Participation in adult education is a Matthew principle. Inequalities are extensively present, and the decrease of these gaps remains an important point of attention. Existing participation models mainly focus on the individual decision-making process of each single citizen. This way of presenting processes gives the impression of a unilateral responsibility of the individual. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue, learning mustn't be separated from the context in which it takes place. The institutional barriers as distinguished by Cross also point out the importance of good institutional support not only from the educational institutions, but also from the regulating governments. Following Desjardins, Rubenson and Milana (2006), a more equal distribution of learning opportunities together with increasing learning outcomes for all citizens can be achieved by a basic public intervention in the planning of adult education provisions. Available resources will be used in a more efficient and effective way and will lead to a better cost-benefit balance. Public intervention is also desirable in case of market failure. They also state that the best way of financing adult education consists of co-financing schemes. Adult learners themselves, the government and firms have to share the costs. Within this approach, the public and the private sectors interplay and take their responsibility in the European rat race to become the most competitive, dynamic and knowledge-based economy in the world, together with increasing social cohesion and becoming a healthy place to live. Despite the information and statistics available on participation in adult education, half of the



European countries will not succeed in obtaining the target of 12.5% of participants by the end of this decade. Further investment in research is needed to disentangle in more detail the underlying factors causing these inequalities and to formulate suggestions and implications to improve the European adult education policy.

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